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SUBJECT: EGYPT SNAPSHOT: VIOLENCE SURROUNDS CLOSURE OF FISH
CAGE INDUSTRY

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Citing public health concerns, GOE officials recently ordered police in the northern Delta to remove thousands of fish-rearing cages from the Nile, prompting clashes that led to the deaths of three fishermen and the injury of thirty more. While scientists, environmentalists, and industry experts agree that the largely unregulated aquaculture industry is hazardous to the environment, human rights activists question the enforcement tactics of the edict, and the government's inability to offer any viable alternatives to the fishermen. End Summary.

ENFORCEMENT PUSH

¶2. (SBU) Citing public health concerns, GOE officials called for the removal of thousands of fish cages, many operating without licenses, in the northern Delta governorates of Damietta and Behira in early December. Quoting a government commissioned report, Behira Governor Mohamed Shaarawi told local press that practices associated with the ballooning aquaculture industry contaminating the Nile were cause for the removal. He added the fishermen had been given a "grace period to sell their fish and minimize their losses." Local media reported on December 3 that police fired rubber bullets on hundreds of local fishermen staging a protest in Damietta, 200 km north of Cairo, killing three and injuring thirty. Police arrested an additional thirty during the removal of 400 cages in the towns of El Saro and El Zarqa in the Damietta governorate.

UNLICENSED SECTOR, LACK OF ENFORCEMENT PARTIALLY TO BLAME

¶3. (SBU) Scientists, government officials, and environmentalists agree that the poorly regulated fish cage industry contaminates Nile water. The Nile fish cage industry, accounting for 55,000 metric tons of the 770,000 metric tons of fish produced country-wide each year, has grown steadily in recent years, according to experts. The industry, which began in the 1970's, started with about 600 licenses for fishermen, raising mainly tilapia for sale in local markets. Regulations state cages need to be kept 100 meters apart, and place limits on the number of fish raised per year. Currently, the exact number of fish cage operators is unknown, but thought to be about 3000 to 4000 licensed operators, and up to several thousand more unlicensed operators.

¶4. (SBU) Industry experts from the World Fish Center (WFC) in Cairo say the increased sediment, uneaten food, and organic pollutants caused by the cage farming method can

"produce as much pollution as raw sewage from a small town." High fish feed costs have driven many fishermen to use manure instead, making the fish unfit for safe human consumption and adding pollutants to the water. Experts argue that strict enforcement of existing regulations could negate the environmental impact. According to Dr. Abdulrahman from the WFC, fish cages can be a "safe industry if practiced correctly, but the regulations need to be set and enforced." Dr. Salah Soliman, an environmental activist and professor in Alexandria agrees. "Fishermen need to use environmentally friendly feed, and limit their activities. There is a way to do this safely."

HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVISTS CALL FOR INVESTIGATION, COMPENSATION

15. (SBU) While few doubt the poorly regulated industry is a public health concern, human rights activists condemn the violence surrounding the removal of the cages, as well as the lack of compensation for the fishermen. The Cairo-based Land Center for Human Rights (LCHR) is helping fishermen file a suit with the administrative court against the Prime Minister, Minister of Agriculture, Minister of Irrigation, and Governor of Damietta. According to LCHR Director Karam Saber, "we don't protest the government's decision, but the violent way in which it was carried out." Another issue at hand is inadequate compensation or alternatives for the thousands involved in the industry. GOE officials have promised to relocate some fishermen to nearby Lake Manzala, which Saber calls "impossible." He says "there are too many fishermen there already who will not allow newcomers."

COMMENT

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16. (SBU) While the GOE's desire to protect public health is certainly valid, reports of excessive force used in executing this decision, as well as the GOE's inability to enforce existing industry regulations, is just cause for criticism. More importantly, as labor activists have argued, the GOE failed to provide viable alternatives for these fishermen, and in doing so has lost an opportunity to show support and concern for some of Egypt's most vulnerable workers.
JONES